LATE ANTIQUE AND SUB-ANTIQUE,

OR

THE "DECLINE OF FORM" RECONSIDERED

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Of all the major stylistic transitions in the history of Mediterranean art, only the transition from Roman to late antique can plausibly be equated with a widespread decline in technical mastery and formal sensitivity. Whatever conclusions we may ultimately draw, it is impossible to study the history of art after ca. 300 without coming to terms with Bernard Berenson's phrase "the decline of form." Berenson used this phrase to describe the sculpture on the Arch of Constantine, but it has come to stand for the apparent non-adherence to Greco-Roman principles which characterizes much of late antique art.[1] Since the "decline" is measured by the humanistic standards of drawing and modeling evidenced in the art of earlier periods, it is tantamount to an alienation of late antique art from the Greco-Roman tradition. From the standpoint of late Antiquity, that tradition appears as a virtual absolute, by whose standards late antique art must be judged.[2]

The consequences of this assumption for our aesthetic and historical appreciation of late antique art are profound. A style or complex of styles that exhibits symptoms of severe decline cannot, almost by definition, be regarded as valid or valuable in itself. It must be seen teleologically. The prevailing view of late antique art is therefore dichotomous. On the one hand, it is possible to single out those currents that adhere most closely to the Greco-Roman tradition. These are seen as conservative, even retrospective. On the other hand, the opposing abstract currents are by definition progressive, in the neutral sense of implying a stylistic *progression* rather than the mere *perpetuation* of older styles. This view accommodates the notion of decline. Decline is after all a process, and a process must have an end result. In this case, the end result is by implication a new visual order, based on standards other than the humanistic ones of Greco-Roman art. Its focus and justification are assumed to be Christianity, which shapes the abstract tendencies of late Antiquity into an art of limited naturalism but great spiritual intensity. This teleological view of the evolution of late antique and Byzantine art follows directly from the idea of a "decline of form" in late Antiquity. It is attractive because it allows us to turn the decline to positive ends: it assumes the fulfillment of a potential for intense expression inherent in the dematerialization of Greco-Roman form. The purpose of this study is to suggest a fundamentally different way of looking at the development of abstract styles in late antique art and their relation to Christianity.

The most radically abstract figure styles in the Roman world belong to the category known as the *sub-antique*.[3] It is a phenomenon associated with,

[1] Bernard Berenson, *The Arch of Constantine: or, The Decline of Form* (London, 1954).

[2] In discussions of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine art it is customary to speak of *classicism* and the *classical tradition;* the contrasting term is *anti-classicism*. I have made an effort to avoid this terminology. In the word "classicism" a culture and a historical period are bound up with the idea of supreme achievement and of moderation as an aesthetic ideal. Since "anti-classicism" is defined in opposition to these things, it is virtually impossible to use either term without seeming to convey a value judgment, however restrained. Instead I shall use the term *Greco-Roman* to designate a historical tradition and *humanism* to designate its defining ethos. The contrasting term is *abstraction*, or *dematerialization*. Although they differ in nuance, I have used them to describe similar or even identical phenomena; strictly speaking, dematerialization is a form of abstraction. Neither term is intended to imply any value judgment whatsoever.

[3] It is to Ernst Kitzinger that we owe not only the term "sub-antique" but our understanding of the complex role that sub-antique art played in the development of late antique styles and the transition from Roman to Byzantine art: Kitzinger, *Early Medieval Art* (London, 1940), 8 ff; idem, *Byzantine Art in the Making* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 11 ff.

but not confined to, the outlying regions of the empire, where Greco-Roman styles lacked a firm hold on popular perceptions and artisanal techniques: what André Grabar has called the "third world of Antiquity."[4] Sub-antique figure styles vary in detail from one locality to another, but they share two overriding characteristics, which remain remarkably constant through several centuries, from the eastern to the western reaches of the empire. These are a partial or complete disregard for internal modeling, and a freedom of outline which ignores the constraints of muscle and bone. We are dealing, then, with an ultra-provincial or folk element in the art of the Roman world. Its consistency over time and space suggests that it represents the lowest level of the Greco-Roman tradition, the level to which it will decay if isolated, for whatever reason, from the resources of a sophisticated humanist culture.[5] Examples include carved stelae from North Africa[6] and tombstones from central Anatolia,[7] of the second and third centuries; floor mosaics of the fifth century from Christian tombs in Tunisia[8] and of the sixth century from the synagogue at Beth Alpha in Israel;[9] and much of the sculpture and textile art grouped under the general heading of "Coptic."[10]

The sub-antique would remain an interesting sidelight to the history of Roman art, were it not for the possibility that it played a decisive role in the breakdown of Greco-Roman formal conventions, beginning in the decades around 300. In these decades, for the first time in the history of Roman art, humanistic ideals were systematically subordinated to identifiable expressive needs. Describing a porphyry sculpture of ca. 300 depicting two of the Tetrarchs, Ernst Kitzinger sums up the expressive force of its simplicity as follows: "With their block-like, repetitive forms riveted together by outsized arms they express one thing only, namely, the solidity of the compact between the persons portrayed, their absolute unity and inseparability, their unshakeable amity and equilibrium. This, of course, was the theoretical premise on which the Tetrarchic system of government rested."[11] He concludes: "These sculptures must have been executed by artists who actually came from the sub-antique sphere and were deliberately chosen because of their ability to communicate a particular message in a language that was extremely forceful and direct and which common men all over the empire could recognize as their own."[12] The reliefs of ca. 315 on the Arch of Constantine depict imperial ceremonies with an emphasis on order that complements the emphasis on solidarity in the porphyry sculpture. As H. P. L'Orange points out, "the new order in art is not . . . an organic order based upon free figures in spontaneous groups, but a *mechanical* order imposed upon objects from above, regulating their mutual relationship—an order which is based upon a higher regularity than that of nature."[13]

In visual terms, this "new order" is identical with Berenson's "decline of form," though the concept of decline is of questionable value when applied to works whose stylistic radicalism has direct and deliberate bearing on the society as a whole. Berenson would have done better to choose as his symbol of decline a work whose departure from Greco-Roman conventions counteracts rather than enhances its expressive purpose. One such work is

[4] André Grabar, "Le tiers monde de l'Antiquité à l'école de l'art classique et son rôle dans la formation de l'art du Moyen Age," *Revue de l'art* 18 (1972), 1–59; rpr. in Grabar, *L'art paléochrétien et l'art byzantin* (London, 1979).

[5] The characteristics of sub-antique art are not confined to the provinces but occur in Italy itself, and it has been argued that in Italy, at least, they represent an indigenous as opposed to a hellenistic idiom: Bianca Maria Felletti Maj, *La tradizione italica nell'arte romana* (Rome, 1977). However, the importance of specifically Italian traditions for developments throughout and even outside the empire is open to question, in view of the broadly consistent character of sub-antique art and its peculiar connection with peripheral regions.

[6] Gilbert-Charles Picard, *Catalogue du Musée Alaoui. Nouvelle série (collections puniques)* (Tunis, 1955), Cb 972, p. 271 and pl. cvii; Anna Maria Bisi, "A proposito di alcune stele del tipo della Ghorfa al British Museum," *Antiquités africaines* 12 (1978), 12–88.

[7] Gustave Mendel, *Catalogue des sculptures grecques, romaines et byzantines du Musée de Brousse* (Athens, 1968), nos. 45 ff; Ann B. Terry and Robert B. Ousterhout, "Souvenir of a World in Transition: A Late Roman Grave Stele from Phrygia," *Bulletin of the Krannert Art Museum*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 6, 1 (1980), 14–28; Louis Robert in *BCH* 107 (1983), pls. pp. 517, 527, 538, 540, 541, etc.

[8] Noel Duval, *La mosaïque funéraire dans l'art paléochrétien* (Ravenna, 1976).

[9] Ernst Kitzinger, *Israeli Mosaics of the Byzantine Period* (New York, 1960); Bernard Goldman, *The Sacred Portal* (Detroit, 1966).

[10] On Coptic sculpture see Ernst Kitzinger, "Notes on Early Coptic Sculpture," *Archaeologia* 87 (1937), 181–215, and Hjalmar Torp, "Leda Christiana," *ActaIRNorv* 4 (1968), 101–12. Torp's article is of special interest because of its emphasis on

Coptic sculpture as an aspect of Roman provincial art, rather than as an exclusively Egyptian phenomenon. For the problems involved in the study of so-called Coptic textiles, and their relation to the mainstream of late Roman art, see J. Trilling, *The Roman Heritage: Textiles from Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, 300 to 600 A.D.* (Washington, D.C., 1982).

[11] Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making*, 12.

[12] Ibid., 13.

[13] H. P. L'Orange, *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire* (Princeton, 1965), 89.

the mosaic of athletic women from Piazza Arme-rina.[14] Of particular interest for our study is the partially draped figure holding out the crown and palm of victory (Fig. 1). The awkwardness of the depiction is striking. The entire right shoulder, arm, and breast are bared, but there is no attempt at either modeling of the flesh or articulation of the limb. Arm and shoulder have the suppleness of a snake rendered in two dimensions, and a circle suffices to indicate the breast. The drapery that covers the left arm and the rest of the body is reduced to a few lines and a change in the color of the tesserae, and the body visible beneath the cloth is equally schematic. These features of the mosaic's style do indeed suggest a decline, if by decline we mean a significant weakening of Greco-Roman humanism and its attendant formal discipline, with no compensating expressive gain. The same features are also characteristic of sub-antique art. Thus even if we take a complex view of the origins of late antique art, one that acknowledges many forces at work besides a "decline of form," we cannot completely reject the idea of formal degeneration linked to an encroachment of provincial or folk styles. In consequence, we cannot escape the teleological perception of late antique art which that idea forces on us.

It is possible, however, to consider the same developments in a very different light. Specifically, the style of the mosaic may not represent a rejection of humanistic values, but rather a conflict between underlying vision and outward form. The figure is conceived in three dimensions, and with a full awareness of foreshortening and of the effects of diaphanous drapery, but it is executed in a manner that directly contradicts the conception. This conflict is present in Roman art from much earlier periods, and from contexts that effectively preclude both expressive distortion and sub-antique influence. Thus in a wall painting of the first cen-

tury A.D. from Pompeii, the figure of Venus is entirely without weight, volume, or a sense of internal structure.[15] In mosaic, this tendency is reinforced by the nature of the medium. Rows of tesserae provide not just external outlines but a two-dimensional analogue to internal articulation. This is not the same as the naturalistic translation of three dimensions into two. Changes in the directions of the rows correspond to the three-dimensional contours of the figure, but often without the subtle and consistent modulation of color which allows true modeling; as a result, the figure is pressed back into a single plane. Since certain forms, those of living things in particular, are meaningless in two dimensions, the viewer in effect completes the artist's work by intuitively reading the two-dimensional pattern of the tesserae in three dimensions.[16]

An obvious example is the figure of a nereid in a second-century mosaic from Dougga (Fig. 2).[17] There is just enough highlighting on the nereid's body to suggest volume, but no indication of solidity. Once more, the artist relies on the conditioned tendency to perceive in three dimensions, a tendency that he focuses and directs by the use of parallel or concentric rows of tesserae (note especially the rendering of the hip and buttock). An analogous technique is used for the hippocamp on which the nereid rides. The illusion of volume and mass comes from large, weakly articulated areas of mosaic whose contrasting light and dark colors are intuitively read as highlights and contours. By the most rigorous technical standards this is simply

[14] The most thorough publication on Piazza Armerina is Andrea Carandini, Andreina Ricci, and Mariette de Vos, Filoso-fiana: The Villa of Piazza Armerina (Palermo, 1982). The stylistic similarity of the "Great Hunt" mosaic at Piazza Armerina to the approximately contemporary political art of the Tetrarchy is clear; see Kitzinger, Byzantine Art in the Making, 9. However, the violent subject matter of this mosaic suggests the possibility of deliberate or expressive distortion, making it no better than the Arch of Constantine as a test case for Berenson's views. The theme of women in athletic activities would seem in principle to pose a similar problem, but in the mosaic itself athleticism is tempered by coyness in a way that does not seem conducive to any particular form of distortion. The pavement is slightly later than the others of the villa, having been laid over an ornamental pavement contemporary with them, but its stylistic assumptions are the same.

[15] Bernard Andreae, The Art of Rome (New York, 1977), pl. 73.

[16] It will be noted that while this study takes off from problems associated with Tetrarchic and Constantinian sculpture, it deals almost exclusively with mosaics. The reason for this change of emphasis is that a two-dimensional art form, which must rely on a combination of technical virtuosity and convention to impart a sense of mass, provides the clearest view of changing approaches to the problems of form and mass. In sculpture (with the exception of very low relief) the presence of an actual third dimension greatly complicates the effort to distinguish between conception and execution. There is no reason to doubt that a detailed examination of the history of Roman and late antique sculpture would reveal, mutatis mutandis, the same processes that we have seen at work in mosaic. On a more general level, the decrease in the importance of freestanding sculpture in the late antique world parallels the process of dematerialization in two-dimensional imagery. Both signal a diminishing concern for physical mass as the basis of representation.

[17] Inventaire des mosaïques de la Gaule et de l'Afrique. II (supplément). Afrique proconsulaire (Tunisie) (Paris, 1915), no. 559, p. 62. For an even more dematerialized treatment of the same theme, cf. Louis Foucher, Inventaire des mosaïques. Feuille no. 57 de l'Atlas Archéologique. Sousse (Tunis, 1960), no. 57.119.

careless workmanship, but such standards are un-realistic in practice. Very few mosaics of any period show, or were intended to show, complete control over every nuance of shading and modeling. Some aspect of the image is always skimped or left to the imagination.

It might be argued that the phenomenon I have described is simply sub-antique influence by an-other name. The important difference is that sub-antique art is defined by its isolation from the mainstream, while dematerialization is an endemic feature of Roman pictorial art throughout its his-tory. It is precisely the separateness of sub-antique art that makes its irruption into the mainstream under the Tetrarchy a disturbingly powerful cul-tural statement. In contrast to this "catastrophist" episode, the pervasiveness of dematerialization makes it possible to see the development of ab-stract style as a *gradual* process, fundamentally un-connected with radical change or decline.

More important, this development may be seen as unconnected with any expressive needs or goals. One might speak of the growth of a linear sensi-bility, implying new expressive potential, but this potential is only partially realized. Outlines are emphasized, and freed from the restraint of inter-nal structure, as that structure ceases to receive careful three-dimensional treatment. This process may give them greater fluidity, but it rarely gives them greater power. In the mosaic of ca. 500 at Delphi (Fig. 3)[18] the curve of the stag's neck con-veys a sense of struggle and mortality far beyond the range of a more naturalistic image. One would expect to see it matched in the drawing of the leop-ard, by an unbroken curve of shoulders, neck, and head conveying strength and implacable ferocity just as effectively as the drawing of the stag conveys desperation. In fact, the outline of the leopard is neither powerful nor graceful. This mixture of strength and weakness suggests a largely fortui-tous meshing of form and content, rather than a fully realized abstract style. Indeed, it is question-able whether there is a *qualitative* difference be-tween the style of the Delphi mosaic and that of the Dougga mosaic in Figure 2. The later work is ostensibly simpler, more dependent on outline, but we have seen that the internal articulation of the figures in the Dougga mosaic is deceptive, an illu-sion of modeling. The virtual disappearance of such articulation with the passage of time may sig-

nal the acceptance of an established fact of artistic practice, rather than a profound change in the ex-pressive function of style.[19]

If the temptation to regard dematerialization as a potential source of physical drama is a legacy of the Tetrarchy, it is the growing ascendency of Christianity and Christian art which gives us com-parable expectations of spiritual drama and inten-sity.[20] The idea of dematerialization as a semanti-cally neutral convention within Greco-Roman art thus calls into question a basic assumption about the development of late antique and Byzantine style: that it constitutes an attempt, whether con-scious or instinctive, to express the ascetic and transcendent elements in late antique society, and thus reflects in some way the processes that trans-formed a pagan culture into a Christian one. In works of Early Byzantine sacred art, such as the late sixth-century Stuma paten (Fig. 4)[21] and the mosaic of ca. 600 from the west wall of St. Deme-trius in Thessaloniki (Fig. 5),[22] the "flat and linear

[19] For other examples of the non-expressive use of demate-rialization, cf. mosaics of the 5th century from Antioch (Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* [Princeton, 1947], 326–45); of ca. 500 from Heraklea Lynkestis (*Heraklea—III. Mosaic Pavement in the Narthex of the Large Basilica* [Bitola, 1967]); and of the 6th century from Nikopolis and Gasr el-Lebia (Spiro, *Critical Cor-pus,* 425 ff; Elizabeth Alföldi-Rosenbaum and John Ward-Perkins, *Justinianic Mosaic Pavements in Cyrenaican Churches* [Rome, 1980]).

[20] Cf., for example, Kurt Weitzmann's assertion that abstrac-tion "was encouraged by the desire to achieve a higher degree of spirituality than could be attained by naturalistic expression": Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality* (New York-Princeton, 1979), xxvi. For a discussion of dematerialization, and related stylistic and compositional features, in Christian sarcophagi of the Con-stantinian period, see Hugo Brandenburg, "Ars Humilis: Zur Frage eines christlichen Stils in der Kunst des 4. Jahrhunderts nach Christus," *JbAC* 24 (1981), 77–84. Brandenburg rejects the assumption that the style of these sarcophagi has a specifically Christian significance, and shows that the dematerializing ten-dencies that they embody are part of a broader evolution in Roman sculpture.

[21] Kitzinger, "Byzantine Art in the Period between Justinian and Iconoclasm," *Berichte zum XI. Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongress* (Munich, 1958) (rpr. in Kitzinger, *The Art of Byzantium and The Medieval West* [Bloomington, 1976]); Erica Cruickshank Dodd, *Byzantine Silver Stamps* (Washington, D.C., 1961), no. 27; Marlia Mundell Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium: The Kaper Koraon and Related Treasures* (Baltimore 1986), esp. 8–15 and 159–70. According to Dodd, the paten is dated by its control stamps to 565–578; Mundell Mango emends the dating to 578–582. Kitzinger attributes the paten to Constantinople, while Mundell Mango argues that it was made in Antioch. Her evi-dence is suggestive but remains circumstantial. Even if the re-attribution is accepted, it is clear that an identical abstract style did flourish in the capital in the closing decades of the 6th cen-tury; cf. the gold cross of Justin II, in the Vatican (Kitzinger, op. cit., 18).

[22] G. and M. Soteriou, *Hē basilikē tou Hagiou Dēmētriou Thessa-lonikēs* (Athens, 1952); Kitzinger, "Byzantine Art in the Period between Justinian and Iconoclasm."

[18] Marie Spiro, *Critical Corpus of Mosaic Pavements on the Greek Mainland, Fourth-Sixth Centuries* (New York, 1978), 229–51.

1. Piazza Armerina, floor mosaic of athletic women (detail), early fourth century, in situ (after Carandini et al.)

2.   Dougga, floor mosaic of the Triumph of Neptune (detail), second century, Bardo National Museum, Tunis

3.   Delphi, floor mosaic from the basilica (detail), late fifth or early sixth century, in situ

4. Silver paten with Communion of the Apostles, from Stuma, late sixth century, National Museum, Istanbul (photo: Hirmer Fotoarchiv)

5. Thessaloniki, mosaic of St. Demetrius and worshipers, west wall of the Church of St. Demetrius, late sixth or early seventh century (photo: Church of St. Demetrius)

rendering of the human figures"[23] is easily inter-
preted as asceticism, otherworldliness, or spiritual-
ity. One should note, however, that both works
show careful attention to stance and gesture, and
to their effect on drapery, despite the lack of any
real weight or substance in the bodies themselves.
There is, in fact, remarkably little difference be-
tween the treatment of the figures in these works
and in the mosaic from Piazza Armerina which we
have examined. (The resemblance between the
adult worshiper in the Thessaloniki mosaic and
the palm-bearer at Piazza Armerina is especially
striking.) Since we have seen that the dematerial-
ized style of Piazza Armerina has no particular ex-
pressive force, it follows that the style of the two
later works is not *intrinsically* spiritual. This is not
the same as saying it is incompatible with spiritual-
ity. Rather, the accommodation of abstraction and
spirituality in the paten and the Thessaloniki mo-
saic is comparable to that of abstraction and phys-
ical drama in the mosaic of the stag and leopard
from Delphi.

Insofar as Christian art conveys a distinctive
spirituality, it does so largely on an intellectual
level, through the manipulation of imagery, rather
than on the intuitive level of style. Both the Thes-
saloniki mosaic and the Stuma paten illustrate this
by their treatment of the fundamental issues of
space, time, and existence. In the mosaic, the fig-
ure of St. Demetrius simultaneously shares the pic-
torial space of the flanking worshipers and
emerges from it to present himself for the viewer's
worship, thereby breaking down the distinction
between the physical world of the viewer and the
spiritual world of the image. In the paten, the
theme of the Communion of the Apostles is itself
a mystical anachronism, to which the doubling of
the Christ figure adds a further dimension of
physical unreality, while at the same time anchor-
ing it to the reality of the liturgy by reflecting the
custom of having two priests, or a priest and a dea-

con, administer the sacrament at the same time.[24]

Although dematerialization is not in itself spiri-
tual, there is a level on which it is inextricably
linked to spiritual expression. Regardless of con-
tent or context, the styles we have examined share
an essential characteristic: they tend to reduce
physical reality to a schematic diagram. This does
not mean rejecting that reality, only rejecting the
need to convey it comprehensively and explicitly.
To schematize physical reality is to internalize it.
The nature of the experience to be conveyed re-
mains essentially unchanged, but the responsibility
for encompassing it shifts decisively from the artist
to the viewer. Reality itself thus becomes a function
not of objective perception but of the internal life.
The same imaginative mechanisms that make pos-
sible the re-creation of physical reality also allow
the communication of complex religious ideas by
means of outwardly simple images. The most basic
expression of these mechanisms is to be found in
the art of the Early Christian catacombs. "The
form in these carvings and paintings, simply car-
ries their content, and makes no attempt to ex-
press or embody it."[25] The success of this form of
visual thinking, and its ultimately decisive influ-
ence on the development of Greco-Roman art, was
dependent on the viewer's ability instinctively to in-
terpret and reconstruct on the basis of limited vi-
sual information. On this level—at one remove, as
it were, from the direct expression of spirituality—
late antique style reflected and reinforced the in-
tensified spiritual concerns of the empire as a
whole, and in particular of the expanding Chris-
tian community.

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[23] Kitzinger, "Byzantine Art in the Period between Justinian
and Iconoclasm," 21.

[24] I. D. Stefanescu, *L'illustration des liturgies dans l'art de Byzance
et de l'orient* (Brussels, 1936), 116 ff; William Loerke, "The Mon-
umental Miniature," in *The Place of Book Illumination in Byzantine
Art* (Princeton, 1975), 61–98 (see esp. 78 ff).

[25] Wladimir Weidlé, *The Baptism of Art* (London, 1950), 9.
Weidlé uses the term "signitive art" to describe these works
(ibid., 10).